

In search of a contemporary narrative for Kashmir

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*Following low turnout in last month's by-election in Kashmir **Ankur Datta** calls for new frames of reference through which to interpret the conflict in Kashmir today. He writes that analysing the insurgency as an unfinished agenda of the Indian partition overlooks new categories and formations that have emerged since the 1990s.*



On 9 April 2017, a by-election was held in the Kashmir valley in Indian administered Jammu and Kashmir. By-elections are often unremarkable events in democratic nation states. However this particular [election](#) was particularly unusual when reports started to filter in of low voter participation. By the next day it was reported that only 7% of the registered electorate had voted and that numerous clashes between protesters and security forces had taken place. While the current conflict over Kashmiri independence is almost three decades old, one of the Indian state's claims to legitimacy has been the state and Indian parliamentary elections which have seen reasonable levels of participation, at least for the past 15 years, enabling the survival of 'mainstream' political parties such as the National Conference (NC) and the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) which currently forms a coalition state government with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

However the by-election must be situated in a context of upheaval in the Kashmir in the past year. The situation has been particularly tense following the killing of [Burhan Wani](#), a young Kashmiri militant, by Indian security forces in July 2016. His death was mourned widely across the valley and resulted in fierce mass protests. The state's response to control the crowds seemed even more heavy-handed than usual, with the use of pellet guns resulting in the killing and injuring of scores of Kashmiris including both active protestors and bystanders. In this light, the by-election appears to indicate the diminishing legitimacy of the Indian state for Kashmiris. Social media entries from Kashmiris at the time highlighted the lack of participation with jokes shared about bored officials manning empty booths. These perspectives are only accessible whenever there is no official ban on [social media in Kashmir](#).



Image: Election boycott graffiti in Srinagar, April 2016. Credit: [Adam Jones](#) CC BY-SA 2.0

The Kashmir conflict is often explained as an unfinished agenda of the Indian partition. During what became the first war between India and Pakistan, the Maharajah of Jammu and Kashmir had signed the accession of the Kingdom of Jammu and Kashmir to India. Nevertheless, there is also a need to acknowledge that there had there had been a

movement for independence in Kashmir since the 1930s. The period after 1947 and the incorporation of Jammu and Kashmir into India has also been extensively discussed with writers pointing out that the relationship between Kashmiris and Indian state remained fraught, marked by the maintenance of control at the expense of democratic aspirations. In hindsight the demand for independence or *azaadi* seems inevitable. Nevertheless since the start of conflict in 1989-90, the older narratives now appear dated. While they explain the path towards insurgency, how do they help us understand contemporary Kashmir?

It is worth considering that the current conflict began as liberal economic reforms were introduced and has unfolded against a backdrop of significant changes in the Indian political economy and ways of understanding citizenship and personhood in India. In other words new categories and formations have emerged which I shall now discuss below.

The question of youth

One of the most striking features of the recent protests have been masses of young people openly assembling to chant slogans and hurl stones at any symbol of the Indian state. The figure of the 'stone pelted' first emerged in the summer of 2008 when protests took place following a land dispute after a period of relative peace. The stone pelters neither fit into the framework of political groups such as the Hurriyet, nor are they militants, which makes them both fascinating and a concern for the Indian state.

What we are seeing is the coming of age of a generation whose past, present and future are defined by the conflict. Whether these youth are seen as radical, misguided or progressive depending on one's political view is irrelevant. Based on my readings and limited experiences, youth in contemporary Kashmir have a strong engagement with the idea of *azaadi* (freedom) and with state and revolutionary violence. They draw on a global vocabulary that echoes struggles in places like Palestine. It is also interesting to note that the question of Kashmiri youth parallels discussions of [Indian youth](#), especially in studies that talk of youth as distinctive economic and political constituencies.

Re-visiting the Indian state

Following his appointment earlier this year, the new Indian Army Chief, [General Rawat](#) declared that Kashmiri civilians who hinder counter insurgency operations would be deemed as 'anti-national'. This statement was made following reports of local Kashmiris protesting against Indian army units during operations. The General's comments are representative of a similar hardening of the Indian state's position towards Kashmir. The tenure of the BJP since 2014 has been marked by a polarisation across India, with any criticism of the current government as 'anti-national'. Previous regimes in the past have presided over a process of militarisation of everyday life in Kashmir, but this was accompanied to some extent by a limited dialogue with Kashmiris. The current regime lacks this, as evident in forms of crowd control with the use of alleged '[non-lethal weapons](#)' and by granting greater impunity to security forces. During protests against the by-elections, a photograph circulated of a civilian tied to a military vehicle as a [human shield](#) for the army. What made the image more tragic is that the person tied to the jeep had actually cast a vote.

Outside Kashmir, the ascendancy of a Hindu nationalist politics is being witnessed across India with reports of the harassment of Kashmiri students and to even the establishment of a group in northern India who have apparently organised to fight [stone pelters](#) in Kashmir. This is not the same state that presided over the accession or the early days of the conflict even if the escalation of violence and protests suggest parallels with the 1990s. What complicates matters further is the ascendancy of the BJP in the region. Jammu and Kashmir is a patchwork state which draws together Kashmir, Jammu and Ladakh. While the movement for *azaadi* is centred in Kashmir, the Jammu region has always been opposed to Kashmiri demands for independence, situating the region instead as part of India. When I conducted research in Jammu, I was struck to see how the region was aligned with the Indian mainstream and opposed to Kashmiri politics, which the BJP was able to build upon, becoming an important player in the state.

Political life in Kashmir is never still. As I write this piece, there are reports of protests by students, with young women now involved following clashes between college students and soldiers. A young Kashmiri Indian army officer was murdered. A militant who had threatened members of the Huriyet was roundly condemned by Kashmiris. A town called Shopian is shut down. The present overwhelms. What we are witnessing is the emergence of a determined population facing a state that is as determined to enforce its power. It is from this clash that a new narrative on Kashmir is emerging.

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About the Author

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